
Film censorship in Mexico, 1925-1928: the case of Saltillo

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Abstract

This paper explores the censorship of American movies in the city of Saltillo, Mexico, between 1925 and 1928, within the framework of New Cinema History. Drawing on archival documents from the office of the Mayor of Saltillo and a historical overview of the interactions and tensions between various actors at the national and international level, we attempt to illustrate the bureaucratic mechanisms that translated presidential decrees and centralized executive orders into concrete actions at the local level, and how these mechanisms interacted with pre-existing social connections in the city, shaping the local movie-going experience. We found that 10 films and 6 distributors were banned – some of them later unbanned – in the city during this period for one of three reasons: denigrating Mexico, denigrating allied nations, and undermining the regime. In all cases, it was the Department of the Interior that ordered the ban, while the city's mayor and his theater inspectors were ultimately responsible for enforcing it. In the case of movies that were 'uncomfortable' for the regime, the correspondence was more urgent and simply ordered a stop to exhibition without mentioning any legal or diplomatic precedent.

Keywords: film, censorship, audience, Saltillo

The 1920s in Mexico was a period of significant social and political change as the country was emerging from the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. During this time, the Mexican government embarked on a nation-building project aimed at defining the country's identity and establishing its future direction. As part of this project, the government sought to regulate various aspects of society, including the rapidly growing film industry. This paper examines the censorship of American movies in the city of Saltillo, Mexico, between 1925 and 1928, within the framework of New Cinema History,[1] which emphasizes the broader historical dimensions of everyday cinema experiences and explores the interconnectedness of cinema with other social institutions and contexts (Verhoeven). By analyzing archival documents from the office of the Mayor of Saltillo (*Presidencia Municipal* Collection), this study aims to shed light on the mechanisms of censorship, the role of institutions, and the interactions between

exhibitors, audiences and government officers that shaped the consumption of movies in the city. The ultimate goal is to deepen our understanding of the cultural, social, and political dynamics of cinema-going in 1920s Mexico, as well as its significance in Saltillo's urban landscape.

New Cinema History

As a research approach, New Cinema History poses questions regarding the manufacturing and circulation of films, aiming to understand how, why, by whom, and for whom films are made and distributed. It seeks to understand cinema as a complex set of processes, practices, and experiences in specific locations and historical contexts (Treveri Gennari et al. 20) Because films are a distinct form of evidence that requires specialized decoding (Maltby et al. 5), New Cinema History expands the scope of relevant information, including government reports, ordinances, records, legislation, marketing

materials, oral histories, industry archives, maps, box-office data, and more (Verhoeven). It also emphasizes the unique and place-specific aspects of cinemagoing, connecting it to the rhythms of local life, relationships, and community (Lozano et al.). New Cinema History aligns with social history by studying the everyday experiences of cinema attendees and their relationships to larger historical events and trends (Maltby et al. 32). This includes studying local exhibition contexts and comparing them with broader frameworks to understand cinemagoing and exhibition practices (Treveri Gennari et al.). Thus, studying censorship from this perspective implies identifying the mechanisms of censorship, the interaction of social institutions that gave rise to it and the agency of exhibitors and audiences to evade it.

A time of turmoil: Mexico in post-revolutionary times.

The 1920s were a turbulent period in Mexican history, characterized by social upheaval and transformation. Emerging from the ashes of the Mexican Revolution, the nation faced the task of rebuilding itself both socially and economically. This tumultuous era witnessed the consolidation of political power, the emergence of new ideologies, and the complex interplay of various social forces, both in the large cities and in less urbanized parts of the country. Against this backdrop of uncertainty and change, the rapidly consolidating Mexican government embarked on a journey to define the nation's identity and future direction.

This period, often referred to – with varying degrees of irony – as the ‘Mexican Renaissance,’ was marked by the presidencies of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles. The two most powerful members of the so-called Sonoran Dynasty undertook an ambitious nation-building project with many avenues of action: restoration of central authority, instauration of a centralized education system, complete overhaul of the financial system, and aggressive separation of church and state (Buchenau 409-410). Key to the project was the formation of a unified, post-revolutionary Mexican identity through the sponsorship of ‘revolutionary art,’

and the restoration of diplomatic relationships. Mexico had not been included in the League of Nations in 1919, having been neutral during World War I and thus not a signatory of the Treaties of Versailles (Zea Prado 117). At the time, this exclusion was not a salient concern to Carranza's (1917-1920) government, which was more occupied with the country's internal turmoil, and cited the League's endorsement of the Monroe Doctrine as a reason for their lack of interest (Herrera León, “El Problema del Distanciamiento Mexicano” 143; Zea Prado 118). But by the time of Obregón's (1920-1924) and Calles' (1924-1928) administrations, things had stabilized in the interior, and the new order of business was to undertake a “process of normalization and institutionalization by the post-revolutionary regime, which implied the gradual reconstruction of relationships with the exterior” (our trans.; Herrera León, “México y la Sociedad de Naciones” 1668).

Mexico's entry into the League of Nations was one of the key diplomatic goals of this process, but not at any cost; in a meeting with the League's delegate Julián Nogueira, Obregón stated that Mexico wanted *to be formally invited* by the European members, to which the envoy replied that there was neither need nor reason for that (Herrera León, “El Problema del Distanciamiento Mexicano” 126-128). Improving public opinion of Mexico in the U.S. was another key objective (Delpar, “Goodbye” 35), especially after the Bucareli Treaty was signed and the U.S. formally recognized Obregón's presidency. The Mexican government organized visits by American businessmen, journalists, and people of influence, and even established a Summer School for Foreigners program (Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue* 18). Still, other than an initial influx of left-leaning intellectuals, American tourism remained low; in contrast, northward migration from Mexico steadily rose, to the point that the Mexican population in the U.S. nearly doubled during the decade (Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue* 16).

American Film, Mexican Film

In the years leading up to 1920, Hollywood cinema often portrayed Mexico and Mexicans

through stereotypical and one-dimensional lenses. Mexican characters were frequently depicted as bandits, villains, or savages, reinforcing negative stereotypes present in American society at the time (Peredo-Castro 66). The Mexican-American War and subsequent annexation of Mexican territories played a role in shaping these perceptions, further contributing to a rarified view of Mexico in early Hollywood films. All of these negative attitudes are evident in the ‘greaser,’ a harmful stereotype perpetuated by American media, literature, and popular discourse at the time. The term ‘greaser’ is documented as early as 1850s Texas (De León 16), and although it was initially used to describe Mexican laborers, it came to allude to a particular negative stock character in Hollywood films: ‘thievish, underhanded, cowardly, and all too ready to resort to violence when driven by jealousy or vengefulness’ (Delpar, “Goodbye” 35). These portrayals were abundant during the first decade of the 1900s, in films such as *The Lost Mine*, *The Pony Express*, *The Mexican Crime* and *The Mexican’s Faith* (Peredo-Castro 66). Despite Carranza’s 1913 law against defamation of Mexico in cinema, the unflattering depictions continued throughout the 1910s.

Ironically, at the same time there seemed to be a growing interest for all things Latin in American popular culture; this interest, however, emphasized – and even romanticized – the Spanish heritage of Latin America and Mexico in particular (Lynch 24-25), in the context of a sort of ‘Spanish craze’ while lamenting the ‘Indian’ aspects of the country’s heritage. Not until the early 1930s would the American infatuation with Mexico grow into its own phenomenon (Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue* 55).

Meanwhile, in Mexico, film was moving in the opposite direction. Art was conferred a pivotal role in Obregón and Calles’ nation-building projects: that of constructor and unifier of the nation’s identity. That said, cinema was not yet central to the endeavor; instead, painting – and particularly muralism – became the medium most favored by Vasconcelos, the man in charge of creating a national identity (Beezley 420). Not until the 1930s would film take the cultural forefront (Belmonte Grey), at the start of the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Mexican cinema. Instead,

these administrations saw film as a practical tool with more mundane uses: propaganda and education (Gudiño Cejudo 19). National-interest films were funded through the Departments of Education, Defense, and Agriculture (De los Reyes 194). The newly formed *Secretaría de Educación Pública* launched projects to increase literacy in the population through film (Gudiño Cejudo 19), while *Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento* produced short films aimed at teaching scientific knowledge and technical abilities. The commercial film industry, on the other hand, struggled and languished, unable to compete with the technical prowess of American productions, and resented the government – and specifically Vasconcelos – for a perceived lack of support (De los Reyes 194-195).

And yet, the figures that would become synonymous with national pride during the later ‘Golden Age’ began appearing in this decade. One such figure was the *charro*, with ornate sombreros and embroidered attire, national symbol of courage and resilience (Nájera-Ramírez 7). Pastoral scenes and colonial architecture dominated films such as *El Caporal* (1920), *La Hacienda* (1921) and *La Parcela* (1922) (Lara Chávez), while the work of Guillermo ‘El Indio’ Calles was dedicated to a post-revolutionary vindication of indigenous heritage (Cineteca Nacional). Still, Mexican film production ground nearly to a halt – an average of six films a year – while the screening of American productions exploded, with over 500 titles imported yearly (Serna, “Exhibition in Mexico” 70).

The Case of Saltillo

Situated in northeast Mexico, the present-day city of Saltillo originally consisted of two distinct settlements that later merged in the 19th century. The first of these settlements, *Villa de Santiago del Saltillo*, was established in 1577 by Alberto del Canto and a group of peninsular Spaniard immigrants seeking to build generational wealth (Muñoz Borrego 66). On the other hand, the town of *San Esteban de la Nueva Tlaxcala* was founded in 1591 by Tlaxcalan settlers, natives from central Mexico allied with the Spaniards, in an attempt to stabilize the region, which was

then inhabited by nomadic tribes considered hostile and dangerous (Güereca Durán 51; Santoscoy 123). *Allende* Street in the city center served as the demarcation line between these two settlements until their amalgamation was decreed by the State's Congress in 1834, resulting in the unified city of Saltillo (Malacara Martínez 112).

During the 17th century, Saltillo experienced economic growth primarily driven by wheat production and trade with neighboring towns in Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Chihuahua, and Nuevo León (Durón Jiménez). The city's annual commercial fairs, held in September and October, became renowned in the region and attracted a wide array of products and overseas merchandise (Marroni). By the 19th century, Jesuits, Franciscans, and Dominicans had established educational institutions in both the Spanish and Tlaxcalan sides of Saltillo (Berrueto González 130-132). Some of these structures later became the city's first venues for film exhibition.

Saltillo's early commercial dominance in the region eventually waned, overshadowed by the rapid growth of Monterrey and Matamoros. This shift prompted an economic deceleration and a need for diversification, leading to changes in its urban landscape (Marroni 22). By 1900, with a population of 24,000, Saltillo introduced modern services such as electric power and a sewer system, a new marketplace, a slaughterhouse, and mule-drawn streetcars to connect various parts of the city (Marroni 22).

Throughout the country, the relations between business owners and laborers underwent transformations following the onset of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. However, this transformation proceeded more gradually in Saltillo. During the first two decades of the 20th century, workers continued to grapple with pre-revolutionary financial systems, reinforced locally by both clerical and secular institutions. Independent, informal and/or intermittent laborers were characterized as "bums" (*vagos*), lazy, drunken, and quarrelsome. A distinction emerged between these "bums" and employees, factory workers, and craftsmen, collectively referred to as the "toiling class" or *clases laboriosas* (Marroni 51). This distinction underscored the

difference between "productive" individuals with formal employment and the "destructive" independent or unemployed people. As cinema emerged in the city, it was regarded as a tool to contain these "bums" and divert them from their perceived vices.

In the 1920s, there were three main movie theaters in Saltillo: *Teatro Obrero* (1917-1950), *Cine Apolo* (1919-1928), and *Teatro Variedades* (1926-1930) (Gutiérrez Cabello). All three of them were owned by the *Adolfo Rodríguez y Hno.* Company, and together they formed the *Circuito Rodríguez*. This company, based in Monterrey, thoroughly dominated the exhibition market in Northeast Mexico at the time. They operated most movie venues and were also heavily involved in distribution: its owners, Antonio and Adolfo Rodríguez, held the exclusive rights to distribute the products of Columbia Pictures and Metro Goldwyn Meyer in the region (Meers et al.).

The 1922 Embargo

When Álvaro Obregón declared an embargo on all Paramount films in February 1922, it was far from the first attempt by the Mexican government to face this issue: the First Mexican Censorship Law was enacted in 1913 to limit the showing of films that denigrated Mexico or the Revolution (Peredo-Castro 66). Carranza's Film Censorship Act of 1919 established the Office of Film Censorship (68), but the measure had little impact. By 1922, after decades of ignored complaints and fruitless actions, the Latin American market had grown enough that losing it might hurt the Hollywood distributors' bottom line (Serna, "Citizenship, Censorship, and the Campaign against Derogatory Films" 231). In February 1922, after a series of offending movies including Paramount's *Her Husband's Trademark*, Obregón's government notified the distributor that they would face consequences if they didn't act. After Paramount refused to withdraw *Her Husband's Trademark* from circulation, Obregón officially banned the screening of Paramount movies. The presidential decree, which included not only the offending movie but all other films distributed by Paramount, was to be enforced at the municipal

level by town and city mayors. Over the course of 1922, this embargo was expanded to include Goldwyn, Metro, Aywon, Educational Films, Warner Bros., and Famous Players-Lasky (Peredo-Castro 68; Serna, *Making Cinelandia* 164). Unlike previous attempts, the embargo raised eyebrows immediately in Hollywood, and may have factored in the formation of the MPPDA (Delpar, "Goodbye" 36; Peredo-Castro 69). After the first meeting of the MPPDA Board of Directors, a resolution was approved condemning thoughtless portrayals of Mexicans (Peredo-Castro 69). And yet, movies with offending content continued to be exhibited freely in the U.S. (Delpar, "Goodbye" 36; Serna, *Making Cinelandia* 163-164) and so the embargo continued. The MPPDA sent a representative to Mexico to speak to the president directly and reach an agreement, at a time when formal diplomatic relations between the two countries had not yet been reestablished. The strategy was fruitful and on November 6, 1922, a formal deal was struck between the Mexican government and the MPPDA (Delpar, "Goodbye" 38).

But the agreement was short lived: by 1924, Metro-Goldwyn was banned in Mexico again, along with Vitagraph (Delpar, "Goodbye" 38) and First National (Peredo-Castro 69). The Mexican government argued that the studios' new strategy – fictionalizing the names of Latin American countries and regions – didn't change much if the quality of the portrayal itself didn't improve (Serna, *Making Cinelandia* 170-171).

This was the state of affairs in 1925, when the municipal documents of Saltillo first start mentioning censorship of films in the city. The banning decrees were passed down from the *Secretaría de Gobernación* to the states and then to the municipalities via telegraphed memo (Serna, "Exhibition in Mexico" 230). It was the mayors of the towns and cities that would be responsible for preventing the screening of movies from the indicted companies. In his report of January 1924, theater inspector Gabriel Rodríguez asked the mayor of Saltillo, Manuel Gómez, to make it so that exhibitors were required to mention in their daily programs the distributor along with the name of the movie (Rodríguez), so it would be easier to tell which movies couldn't be screened (from later documents, we learn

that his request was ignored). The inspector also shared his suspicion that the distributor's name had been intentionally cut out of the films to avoid the embargo. If we compare this report to those of municipal inspectors around the country in 1922 before the initial embargo (Serna, *Making Cinelandia* 164), we can see a marked difference: whereas the pre-embargo inspectors in Mexico City and Guanajuato are limited to the realm of reprimands and moral disappointment (164), the Saltillo inspector in 1924 has the authority of the presidential decree behind him. By 1925, the mechanism had been put in place for theater inspectors at the local level throughout the country to stop certain movies from screening at the behest of the central government. As we will see in the next section, this mechanism was often employed not just to stop exhibition of denigrating movies but also for other, more political reasons.

Film censorship in Saltillo, 1925-1928

In our exploration of the ban on American films in Saltillo during the 1920s, our primary source material consists of a collection of 14 documents, originating from the office of the Mayor of Saltillo, that directly pertain to the prohibition of certain films and distributors. The documents span from 1925 to 1928. Most of these documents are memorandums from the office of the Executive Secretary of the State (the governor's right-hand man), hand-signed by him, and addressed to the mayor of Saltillo.

These memos followed a regular format, featuring the distributor's name, the title of the film, and the original communication received from Mexico City. Consistently, all documents attribute these directives to *Secretaría de Gobernación*, with some also mentioning *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*. From our examination of these documents, *Secretaría de Gobernación* played a central role in communicating the orders to "impede exhibition" to the states, on a case-by-case basis. In practice, this process involved *Gobernación* sending a memo to the governor's office which, in turn, passed the information along to the mayor of Saltillo. The mayor, upon receiving these orders, acted by notifying the ban to the city's theater inspectors. Given that

all exhibition venues in Saltillo at the time were under the ownership of *Circuito Rodríguez*, it is noteworthy that the mayor also frequently instructed his office to “notify the Rodríguez” directly. This connection between the mayor’s office and *A. Rodríguez y Hno.* underscores the significant role that the company played in the social and economic landscape of the city at the time. Other documents from the office of the mayor attest to this: a short letter informs the mayor that – as is tradition for *A. Rodríguez y Hno.* – he has been granted four complimentary seats for all functions at the *Teatro Obrero* (Orta). The mayor instructs to graciously accept and give thanks to the company’s representative. In another document (by *A. Rodríguez y Hno.*), the company informs the mayor that they’ll be delighted to comply with a request to allow their lighted marquees to be used for official purposes and, furthermore, are willing to perform this civic service free of charge. Although the documents often mention “the Rodríguez” or “the Rodríguez brothers,” it is the company’s representative [2] in Saltillo – and not the owners themselves, located in Monterrey – who corresponds with the local authorities.

In five instances, the contents of the memos bear striking similarities to those documented

in Aguascalientes by Gutiérrez Pantoja (483-484). This suggests that both Aguascalientes and Saltillo likely received duplicate copies of the same memorandum from *Gobernación*. This supposition is further substantiated by identical spelling errors present in both sets of documents. For example, both in Aguascalientes and Saltillo, in a memo (Oyervides, Prohibición de la Película *Su Enemigo la Ley*) ordering a ban on the film *Su enemigo la ley*, the name of film distributor Triangle K.C. is written “Triangle Kav See,” presumably because they received the exact same transcription. The municipality of La Paz mentions the same memorandum on November 17, 1925, with the spelling “Triangle Kay See” (Archivo Histórico Pablo L. Martínez 44)

From 1925 to 1928, 10 offending movies and 6 companies are mentioned in the documents, as seen in Table 1. In most cases, the order to impede exhibition pertains to a single movie, but some of the memos mandate embargos on distributors, citing the precedent established in 1922. One such case is the memo of January 19, 1925, which declares that “the presidential agreement of June 5, 1922 is to be applicable to the products of Jimmy Aubrey Production Inc., for having produced the movie *El Perturbador*[3], which is denigrating to the uses and customs

Film Name	Distributor	Date of Ban	Date of Memo	Medium	Mayor's Response	Type of Ban
<i>El Perturbador</i>	Jimmy Aubrey Production Inc.	1/15/1925	1/19/1925	Written memo	1/22/1925	Distributor
<i>La Furia Desatada</i>	Universal Film Company	4/23/1925	4/29/1925	Written memo	5/6/1925	Distributor
<i>The Genuine Panama</i>	Not Mentioned	8/11/1925	8/17/1925	Written memo	8/25/1925	Movie
<i>Vivo o Muerto</i>	Casa Pathé	8/15/1925	8/17/1925	Telegram	8/22/1925	Movie
<i>Los Cuatro Jinetes del Apocalipsis</i>	Metro Picture Corporation	10/13/1925	10/16/1925	Written memo	10/28/1925	Movie
<i>Su Enemigo la Ley</i>	Triangle Kav See	10/16/1925	10/23/1925	Written memo	10/28/1925	Movie
<i>Mare Nostrum</i>	Not Mentioned	3/9/1927	3/14/1927	Written memo	3/16/2027	Movie
<i>El Atropellado</i>	Anónimo	9/8/1927	9/19/1927	Written memo	N/A	Movie
<i>Funerales de los Señores Arzobispo Mora y Del Río y Obispo Valdespino</i>	Not Mentioned	6/11/1928	6/18/1928	Written memo	6/21/1928	Movie
<i>Lines and Races</i>	Ink-Well Studios	10/1/1928	10/8/1928	Written memo	10/18/1928	Distributor

Table 1. Films banned in Saltillo, 1925-1928

of Mexico” (our trans. Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Casa Jimmy Aubrey Production Inc.). The 1922 decree is again invoked on April 29 to order an embargo on Universal Film Company in retaliation for the film *La Furia Desatada* (Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Casa Universal Film Co.). A subsequent memo on May 8th calls off the embargo (Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Derogada la Prohibición de la Casa Universal Film Co.). Considering that the mayor had only notified the inspectors of the ban on May 6th, it’s safe to assume that this particular prohibition was effectively never enforced.

For the most part, though, it was singular films that were banned during this period in Saltillo, mostly because they were perceived to contain scenes denigrating to Mexico. On September 19 (Flores), 1927, the mayor passes along the order to ban *El Atropellado*, a film which – the memo specifies – was produced anonymously in the U.S. and distributed in Mexico by *M. González y Compañía*.

The only ban order to come to Saltillo via telegram, rather than written letter, is the one prohibiting *Vivo o Muerto*, a film depicting Pancho Villa’s attack on Columbus, NM (Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Película *Vivo o Muerto*). This is an example of the presidential decree being used not just to ban the movies that denigrated Mexico but also the ones that ‘denigrated the Revolution’, which is to say, went against the narrative of the reigning Sonoran Dynasty. Pancho Villa had become a bitter rival of Obregón and Calles before his pardon and eventual assassination (Cázares Puente and Treviño Villarreal), and as a political and social figure he was – to put it mildly – problematic to the sitting government. Thus, while the orders to ban racist movies crept to Coahuila by written letter, the order to stop a movie that might undermine the Sonorans’ national narrative traveled on the electrical wire. The order was enacted swiftly, with the mayor notifying not just the theater inspectors but also the Chief of Police.

Another interesting case is the order to stop screenings of the filmed funeral of Archbishop José Mora y del Río (Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Película *Funerales*

de los Señores Arzobispo Moral y del Río y Obispo Valdespino). This order came at the height of the Cristero uprising, a violent and protracted conflict from 1926-1929 between the forces of President Calles and an armed rebellion which arose in response to his government’s anti-Catholic policies and persecution (García Ugarte 133-155). The Cristeros, primarily composed of devout Catholic rural workers and other supporters of the Catholic Church, rose up in armed resistance against these measures under the battle cry *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*

Against this backdrop, it’s not surprising that the Calles government would seek to stop exhibition of the funeral: José Mora y del Río had been the most prominent voice of Catholic discontent in the country. The conflict had begun, at least in public perception, as a personal struggle between the Archbishop and President Calles (García Ugarte 139). Archbishop Mora y del Río was arrested by the regime and later sent into exile, where he died. He was, by far, the most vocal and prominent opponent of the President.

Unlike most other documents (but much like the above-mentioned telegram), no law or decree was cited in the letter that informed the mayor about the ban on the archbishop’s funeral. Instead, the missive reads “this Department has seen fit to agree to prohibit throughout the Republic the screening of the cinema film titled *Funerales de los señores arzobispo Mora y del Río y obispo Valdespino*, which is divided in two parts and was recently recorded in San Antonio, Texas” (our trans.; Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Película *Funerales de los Señores Arzobispo Moral y del Río y Obispo Valdespino*). A letter from the Chief of Police a week later assures the mayor that all measures have been taken to prevent the screenings.

This ban, like the previous one, illustrates how movies with political implications were handled less officially but more urgently than movies which fell squarely under the scope of the 1922 decree. There was, however, a third category: movies which were denigrating to friendly nations.

Such is the case of Rex Ingram’s work. The Irish director’s film, *The Four Horsemen of the*

Apocalypse, was unbanned on October 16, 1925 'because, after reviewing it, the German Delegation in Mexico declared that it contains nothing offensive to their country' (our trans.; Oyervides, *Permiso para Exhibir la Película Los cuatro Jinetes del Apocalipsis*). Another Rex Ingram movie, *Mare Nostrum*, presents an interesting case: along with the letter ordering the ban (Berchermann), *Gobernación* forwarded the note received by *Relaciones Exteriores* from the German Delegation, offering a window into the diplomatic process:

... the movie *Mare Nostrum* which, as I had the honor to relay to Your Excellency in my note from November 19, quite alarmed the German colony here, continues to be shown in other Mexican cities, from where I receive telegrams asking if there is no way to prevent their exhibition. For this reason, I'd be thankful to receive from Your Excellency the decision from Secretaría de Gobernación stating the reasons why the screening of this movie *Mare Nostrum* was allowed ... (our trans.; Berchermann).

A letter from August 17th of the same year (Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Película *The Genuine Panamá*) contains a similar note from the Panama Delegation, requesting the ban of the movie 'The Genuine Panama'. In the note, the Panama Delegation invokes – and praises – the country's recent policy regarding bad portrayals of Mexico and other friendly states:

... requesting that said film's exhibition be forbidden according to the policy that Mexico has maintained of late in matter of cinema films, and by which all movies that denigrate friend nations are excluded from exhibition, and also to put into practice the reciprocity to which we are beholden by virtue of the constant ministering of our diplomatic and consular agents ... (our trans.; Secretaría Oficial de Gobierno, Prohibición de la Película *The Genuine Panamá*)

As for the way in which the censorship was enacted by the theater inspectors, we know

precious little; although some inspector reports are present in the mayor's papers, the only one that mentions the bans is the one containing inspector Gabriel Rodríguez's suspicions that the theaters are tampering with the movies to evade the prohibition. Some other American films are mentioned by name in the reports, although not due to the bans but because of the poor quality of the copies being projected. As for Mexican commercial films, they are completely absent. It's not surprising, considering that – as we've established – domestic production was practically negligible during this time. In keeping with the government's view of film as a more pragmatic tool for education and modernization, the only national productions are mentioned in a letter to the mayor by a Mr. Antonio T. Alanís, who presents himself as a "Cultural Cinematographer" and requests monetary compensation for his service to the community. The letter states that "a few departments of the executive branch have made available to me several movies made in our country, quite useful for the education of children, laborers and peasants" (our trans.; Alanís). The films listed by Alanís include topics such as meat processing, cattle vaccination and dental hygiene. We have already mentioned that both the Department of Agriculture and the incipient National Department of Education (*SEP*) invested in a number of literacy projects throughout the country during the administrations of Obregón and Calles, and it is very likely that these films were part of their efforts. However, we have no way of knowing whether their goals were accomplished or how many people attended these educational shows. We do know, however, from the reports of the inspectors and other documents collected for this project, that as far as commercial cinema goes, business was booming in Saltillo: from insufficient toilets to the need for ventilation (De León), most of the negatives mentioned in the inspector's reports stem from blatant overcrowding in the theaters. Of the 11 cities where the *Circuito Rodríguez* operated, Saltillo is the only one other than Monterrey – at least according to the company's stationery (A. Rodríguez y Hno.) – with more than one theater. Whether this was because of the city's geographical proximity to their center of operations or because it had a large

consumer base relative to city size, it is clear that cinema was Saltillo's preponderant form of public entertainment from 1925 to 1928.

Conclusion

The censorship of American movies in 1920s Mexico was the product of complex dynamics between various actors at the national and international level, but it also influenced and modified the local movie-going experience in towns and cities throughout the country. In the archival documents from the office of the Mayor of Saltillo, we not only observe the inner bureaucratic workings of the censorship itself but also get a glimpse into the interactions that it elicited within the city. The evolving relationship between the Mexican government and Hollywood, and their negotiation and struggles with local venue monopolies, occurred on a larger scale but had concrete implications for the cinema experiences of people in Saltillo.

When it comes to public debate over the film censorship by the Mexican state in the 1920s, we can identify four interest groups with different goals. The Mexican government sought to reconstruct the image of Mexico both diplomatically and among the Mexican people, whose identity was fractured by the revolution. The Hollywood studios and distributors, incarnated by 1922 in the MPPDA, aimed to evade regulation by reaching informal agreements both in the U.S. and internationally, and were beginning the journey of self-moderation that would eventually lead to the Code era. Because of the growing immigration, ex-patriate Mexican citizens in the U.S. and even Mexican-Americans emerged as another group in this controversy, acting as watchdogs of national pride and sending advance notice of offending films and even film clippings as evidence of the offense (Serna, "Exhibition in Mexico" 235-243). Lastly, the exhibitors in Mexico were the most affected by the government's measures, considering that the vast majority of films shown were American in origin. The larger companies – such as *Circuito Rodríguez* – were by then strong enough both socially and financially that they could openly fight against censorship, but they may have employed more covert tactics

to evade the bans, as suspected by theater inspector Gabriel Rodríguez.

As with any controversy, there were tensions between these groups at different levels. In Saltillo, as a smaller city in northeast Mexico, the interaction that is most palpable is between the exhibitors and the government. Even though there are some tensions in that relationship – as evidenced by the inspector's report – the missives from *A. Rodríguez y Hno.* to the mayor evidence a cordial relationship, marked by the small-town niceties that are to be expected in a small city where all the people in positions of authority probably know each other. From the mayor notifying *Circuito Rodríguez* directly about the bans, to the gifting of seats and marquee space, it is clear that the relationship between the mayor and the company's representative is an agreeable one with open lines of communication. What is interesting is that in this relationship, mayor Manuel Gómez and attorney José Orta are both acting on behalf of larger interest groups that transcend the environment of the city: the mayor represents the national government and Orta represents the Rodríguez Company.

From the documents we have studied, we can identify three main reasons for censorship of a film in 1925-1928 Saltillo: because they were denigrating to the image of Mexico, because a friendly nation had requested it, or because they were detrimental to the regime's narrative. In all cases, it was the Department of the Interior that ordered the ban, while the city's mayor and his theater inspectors were ultimately responsible for enforcing it. In the case of denigrating movies, the 1922 presidential decree was invoked. In the case of movies that were denigrating to other nations, the Department of the Interior acted by request from the Department of Foreign Relations, which had received complaints or requests from foreign delegations or diplomats. In the case of movies that were 'uncomfortable' to the regime, the correspondence was both more urgent and vaguer, with no law or decree being mentioned. This might indicate that the senders – and perhaps even the recipients – were aware that there was no provision that legally justified the censorship. All three reasons for censorship that we found are, to a degree,

political. Unlike other incarnations of censorship at the time, no movies were forbidden during this time for reasons of morality. That, however, does not necessarily mean that the moral fiber of screened films was not a concern: in fact, it might even be that examining the morality of the movies was an implied responsibility of inspectors, to a degree that it is taken for granted: on March 5, 1925, the inspector reports that he found the film *Canción de Cuna* to be “moral, but highly-damaged, with constant interruptions that annoyed the public and elicited protest” (our trans.; De León). The inspector noted the bad physical state of the movie, but mentioned that he found it to be moral, which may imply that it was part of his duty to perform this examination. If there was indeed a public decency aspect to the work of the inspectors, it was definitely a local phenomenon and not part of the bureaucratic mechanism that enforced the 1922-rooted bans and embargoes.

In this article, we’ve tried to gain a glimpse into how complex and multi-faceted diplomatic conflicts at the binational level unfolded in a small city in northeastern Mexico. It is difficult to trace how each aspect of this conflict impacted the audience’s experience when attending the cinema or how local interests intersected with the presidential goals of national representation. That said, from the fixation on national identity to the use of cinema to ‘modernize’ and ‘educate’, it is clear that the central government of Mexico at the time had a paternalistic approach that subtly – and sometimes not so subtly – patronized the population and probably underestimated their capabilities. It is hard not to notice traces of this prejudice in the way the embargoes were decreed and carried out. Moral and political censorship is, after all, a condescending measure that tacitly judges the audience incapable of acting on their own judgement to discern what is appropriate.

Kuhn points out, “In the early years, film censorship was productive in the sense that it actively contributed to creating a public sphere of cinema, establishing cinema as an institution and an object of regulation,” but eventually the burden of a national censorship system had an impact on the entire cinema-going experience, mainly to the detriment of audiences (qtd. in Biltereyst et al. 96-111). In their description of

a conflict between the Motion Picture Export Association and the Netherlands Cinema Association, Pafort-Overduin and Gomery (147-158) touch on an interesting subject: part of an embargo based on national identity is trying to sell the public on that identity. Let us not forget, also, that Saltillo was quite removed from the country’s political and economic center, and that José Vasconcelos himself, the man in charge of educating the nation and creating its identity, wasted no opportunity to make it known that he believed the north to be a backward and barbarous region (Salas Cortés).

This patronizing undertone to the censorship had resonance in Saltillo because of the prevailing idea that some segments of the population needed to be educated into productivity and saved from their own vices and harmful behaviors. There was irony in these measures: for a man with a surprisingly modernist-industrialist approach (Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue* 22), Obregón’s bans harmed not just Mexican entrepreneurs but also Mexican workers in a booming economic sector (Serna, “Exhibition in Mexico” 235-236). If nothing else, it is clear that while the experience of going to the movies in Saltillo between 1925 and 1928 may have been influenced – or even inconvenienced – by the censorship policies passed down from Mexico City, it was far from the main concern of the attendees. As attested by the inspectors, other more immediate and mundane worries were on their minds: the theaters were too hot; the movies were torn from overuse; the aisles reeked of urine and people were committing indecent acts in the back rows (De León). The experience of going to the movies in Saltillo was situated in the physical, not in the abstract realms of diplomatic bonds, Revolutionary narratives, or national honor.

Endnotes

[1] This study is part of the project *Cultura de la Pantalla en Saltillo: ideología, economía política y audiencias en interacción con el cambio social*, conducted at *Universidad Autónoma de Coahuila* as part of the *Cultura de la Pantalla* network, whose objective is to examine cinema's social practice and experience through empirical research inspired by New Cinema History, focusing on film exhibition spaces, programming and the experience of audiences (Meers et al.). This paper presents a small part of our findings for the first phase of the study, carried out through a systematic review of historical documents related to cinema at the *Archivo Municipal de Saltillo* (Municipal Archive of Saltillo). The documents mentioned are available for public consultation at the archive. We'd like to thank the Archive's staff for their invaluable help with this project.

[2] The representative is José Orta, legal attorney of the Rodríguez's interests in Saltillo and manager of the Teatro Obrero.

[3] Probably "Tootsies and Tamales" (Noel M. Smith, 1919).

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